DEPARTMENT OF STATE REVENUE

LETTER OF FINDINGS NUMBER: 04-0442
Sales and Use Tax
For Tax Years 2004

NOTICE: Under IC 4-22-7-7, this document is required to be published in the Indiana Register and is effective on its date of publication. It shall remain in effect until the date it is superceded or deleted by the publication of a new document in the Indiana Register. The publication of this document will provide the general public with information about the Department's official position concerning a specific issue.

ISSUE

I. Sales and Use—Aircraft Purchase

Authority: Gregory v. Helvering, 293 U.S. 465 (1935); IC 6-2.5-2-1; IC 6-2.5-5-8; IC 6-6-6.5-9; IC 6-8.1-10-4; 45 IAC 2.2-5-15; 45 IAC 2.2-4-27; Horn v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue, 968 f.2d 1229 (D.C. Cir. 1992); Commissioner v. Transp. Trading and Terminal Corp., 176 F.2d 570 (2nd Cir. 1949); Black's Law Dictionary (7th ed. 1999)

Taxpayer protests the imposition of sales tax on the purchase of an aircraft.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

Taxpayer purchased an aircraft, but did not pay sales tax on the purchase. Taxpayer claimed that the purchase was exempt from sales tax because the aircraft was to be used for rental or leasing to others. The Indiana Department of Revenue ("Department") conducted an investigation regarding the rental or leasing of the aircraft and determined that there was insufficient evidence to support the claim of rental or leasing as the use of the aircraft. As a result of this investigation, the Department denied the claim for exemption and issued a proposed assessment for use tax on the purchase of the aircraft. Taxpayer protests the assessment. Further facts will be supplied as required.

DISCUSSION

I. Sales and Use—Aircraft Purchase

Taxpayer purchased an aircraft for two hundred thirty one thousand, six hundred and ninety five dollars ($231,695.00) and claimed a sales tax exemption. The Department compared a non-related aircraft rental company's rate for the same type of aircraft, to the rate taxpayer charged

for its aircraft. The rental rate was far below the market rate. The Department determined that taxpayer was not renting the aircraft and denied the exemption. Taxpayer protests the denial.

Taxpayer states that the aircraft was used for rental to others, and therefore was exempt from sales tax under IC 6-2.5-5-8(b), which states:

> Transactions involving tangible personal property other than a new motor vehicle are exempt from the state gross retail tax if the person acquiring the property acquires it for resale, rental, or leasing in the ordinary course of the person's business.

Taxpayer states that it is in the aircraft rental and leasing business. A review of the paperwork taxpayer filed with the Department reveals that the lessee corporation did not register with the Department as a separate entity, but rather as a DBA ("Doing Business As") under the lessor's Taxpayer Identification Number (TID) and Federal Identification Number (FID). In other words, here there was one business with two different names. Renting an aircraft from one branch of a business to another branch of that same business doing business under a different name does not qualify for the exemption provided in IC 6-2.5-5-8(b).

Further guidance is found in 45 IAC 2.2-5-15, which states:

(a) The state gross retail tax shall not apply to sales of any tangible personal property to a purchaser who purchases the same for the purpose of reselling, renting or leasing, in the regular course of the purchaser's business, such tangible personal property in the form in which it is sold to such purchaser.
(b) General rule. Sales of tangible personal property for resale, renting or leasing are exempt from tax if all of the following conditions are satisfied:
    (1) The tangible personal property is sold to a purchaser who purchases this property to resell, rent or lease it;
    (2) The purchaser is occupationally engaged in reselling, renting or leasing such property in the regular course of his business; and
    (3) The property is resold, rented or leased in the same form in which it was purchased
(c) Application of general rule.
    (1) The tangible personal property must be sold to a purchaser who makes the purchase with the intention of reselling, renting or leasing the property. This exemption does not apply to purchasers who intend to consume or use the property or add value to the property through the rendition of services or performance of work with respect to such property.
    (2) The purchaser must be occupationally engaged in reselling, renting or leasing such property in the regular course of his business. Occasional sales and sales by servicemen in the course of rendering services shall be conclusive evidence that the purchaser is not occupationally engaged in reselling the purchased property in the regular course of his business.

> (3) The property must be resold, rented or leased in the same form in which it was purchased.

Taxpayer states that it was in the business of leasing aircraft and therefore qualifies for the exemption provided by 45 IAC 2.2-5-15. 45 IAC 2.2-5-15(b) requires that three conditions be met in order to qualify for the exemption. One condition is 45 IAC 2.2-5-15(b)(2), which states that the purchaser must be occupationally engaged in reselling, renting or leasing such property in the regular course of his business. The Department notes that a single individual signed as both lessee and lessor on the leasing agreement. Combined with the rental rate far below normal market rates, this shows that taxpayer was not occupationally engaged in reselling, renting or leasing the aircraft in the regular course of its business. Under these circumstances, taxpayer does not satisfy 45 IAC 2.2-5-15-(b)(2) and does not qualify for the leasing exemption.

Next, taxpayer explains that its customer paid a lower lease rate because it was paying other expenses which, when added to the lease rate, brought the total customer paid closer to comparable lease rates. Taxpayer explains that, under the "dry lease", the lessee was responsible for paying expenses such as insurance, hangar, fuel, maintenance and crew. This supposedly brought the leasing costs to appropriate levels. 45 IAC 2.2-4-27(d) states in relevant part:

> The rental or leasing of tangible personal property, by whatever means effected and irrespective of the terms employed by the parties to describe such transaction, is taxable.
>
> (1) Amount of actual receipts. The amount of actual receipts means the gross receipts from the rental or leasing of tangible personal property without any deduction whatever for expenses or costs incidental to the conduct of the business. The gross receipts include any consideration received from the exercise of an option contained in the rental or lease agreement; royalties paid, or agreed to be paid, either on a lump sum or other production basis, for use of tangible personal property; and any receipts held by the lessor which may at the time of their receipt or some future time be applied by the lessor as rentals.
>
> …

This regulation means that taxpayer was required to collect sales tax on all consideration it received from its customer for lease of the aircraft. Taxpayer was not collecting sales tax on the consideration it received from its customer when the customer paid for insurance, hangar, fuel, maintenance and crew. This is further evidence that taxpayer's relationship with its customer was not a valid lessor/lessee relationship.

Next, taxpayer states that it also created the leasing corporation in order to avoid liability in the event of a catastrophic loss. While this may or may not be the case, it is ultimately irrelevant since it does not explain why the rental rate was set at a fraction of the rate charged for comparable aircraft in the area. The fact that the rental rate was so low makes it plain that the rental agreement was set up to avoid sales tax, since the rental rate would have nothing to do with potential liabilities from a crash.

In its protest letter and at hearing, taxpayer complained that it was being victimized by its attempts to comply with Indiana tax laws. Taxpayer states, "The taxpayer voluntarily registered the aircraft with the State of Indiana to further prove that it has no intention to comply with all Indiana regulations. It could have chosen to not register the aircraft and very likely escape paying any sales tax on rental revenue to the Indiana Department of Revenue." Taxpayer then claims that it contributes to Indiana's tax base by purchasing aircraft services and aircraft related merchandise in Indiana, and that it has the option of hangaring the aircraft in Illinois. Taxpayer also states, "If the Indiana Department of Revenue continues to be non-business friendly, and prosecute and penalize law abiding taxpayers, ultimately, businesses will relocate out of Indiana and the treasury of the State of Indiana will suffer."

The Department takes a dim view of threats of tax fraud. The Department hereby informs taxpayer that if it does indeed choose to not register an aircraft in an attempt to "escape paying any sales tax on rental revenue", it may be subject to a one hundred percent (100%) fraud penalty on such taxes as it is trying to "escape", as provided by IC 6-8.1-10-4. As for taxpayer's decision concerning where to hangar the aircraft, that is up to taxpayer. The only thing the Department is concerned with in this instance is whether or not taxpayer qualified for the claimed exemption.

Finally, the Department notes that a lease is defined as "[a] contract by which the rightful possessor of personal property conveys the right to use that property in exchange for consideration." Black's Law Dictionary 898 (7th ed. 1999). The parties' agreement reflected the fact that pilot/lessee never expected to pay consideration sufficient to justify recognizing the agreement as a lease. Instead, the lease agreement falls squarely within the definition of a "sham transaction." The "sham transaction" doctrine is long established both in state and federal tax jurisprudence dating back to Gregory v. Helvering, 293 U.S. 465 (1935). In that case, the Court held that in order to qualify for a favorable tax treatment, a corporate reorganization must be motivated by the furtherance of a legitimate corporate business purpose. Id at 469. A corporate business activity undertaken merely for the purpose of avoiding taxes was without substance and "[t]o hold otherwise would be to exalt artifice above reality and to deprive the statutory provision in question of all serious purpose." Id at 470. The courts have subsequently held that "in construing words of a tax statute which describe [any] commercial transactions [the court is] to understand them to refer to transactions entered upon for commercial or industrial purposes and not to include transactions entered upon for no other motive but to escape taxation." Commissioner v. Transp. Trading and Terminal Corp., 176 F.2d 570, 572 (2nd Cir. 1949), *cert. denied*, 338 U.S. 955 (1950). "[T]ransactions that are invalidated by the [sham transaction] doctrine are those motivated by nothing other than the taxpayer's desire to secure the attached tax benefit" but are devoid of any economic substance. Horn v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue, 968 f.2d 1229, 1236-7 (D.C. Cir. 1992). The rental/lease rate charged by taxpayer for the aircraft in question here can only be considered a "sham transaction". The only reason to charge a fraction of the fair market rate for rental/lease of the aircraft and arrange for alternate compensation is to avoid tax. Since taxpayer was not involved in a valid lease or rental agreement with its sole customer the Department was correct to deny taxpayer's claim for the rental/lease exemption.

In conclusion, taxpayer's reference to IC 6-6-6.5-9(a)(4) is inapplicable since it deals with aircraft licensing tax rather than sales tax. Taxpayer was not occupationally engaged in renting to others and does not qualify for the exemption found in 45 IAC 2.2-5-15. It is irrelevant if the leasing corporation was formed to shield taxpayer from liability in the event of a crash, since that would have no influence on the rental rate. Taxpayer was not collecting sales tax on the consideration it received from its customer when the customer paid for insurance, hangar, fuel, maintenance and crew, as required by 45 IAC 2.2-4-27(d). Taxpayer's relationship with its customer was too close and the terms of the rental agreement too generous to establish an arms-length business relationship. The rental/lease arrangement between taxpayer and its customer constitutes a "sham transaction" entered into for the sole purpose of avoiding taxes, as established in Gregory v. Helvering. Without a valid rental/lease agreement, taxpayer is ineligible for the rental exemption on the purchase of the aircraft.

FINDING

Taxpayer's protest is denied.

WL/JM/JS 051808